

# WHAT SHOULD HISTORY TEACHERS KNOW? ASSESSING HISTORY STUDENTS AUTHENTICALLY AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE PGCE YEAR

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## **Abstract**

*For many years the author has concluded a PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) History Education course by choice with a formal written examination (albeit an unusual one – it doesn't have a time limit, for instance). When somewhat bemused students each year ask "Why?", the answer given is so that they will be assessed while working completely on their own under similar pressure to that which they will experience when preparing material for the classroom the following year. The article provides illustrations of the examination and students' answers. It considers how student teachers' pedagogical content knowledge may be assessed in history, how the knowledge and understanding of history may be assessed together with core history teaching abilities, and the interaction of history skills and content. It raises, also, issues of formative and summative assessment and lower and higher order thinking, and poses questions about testing the knowledge of in-service teachers.*

**Keywords:** PGCE; Assessment; Curriculum; Examination; History Education; Pedagogical Content Knowledge; Skills.

## **Introduction**

My first PGCE secondary (Grades 8 to 12) history education class had 67 students. It took a while to learn to distinguish them all and it wasn't possible know them all equally well within the twenty teaching weeks. It also took some time to assess all their work. What worried me most towards the end of the year was that I couldn't tell for certain what each one had done individually and that I had no clear means to benchmark their achievements. That made me decide to have them write a sit down examination, which would be moderated by a local history teacher whom I respected. I wanted it

to be a meaningful test and I wanted the students to leave the year on a high note, so it couldn't be a "Discuss the advantages of empathy in history"–type of paper and nor could it be a race against time. So, I decided it should be as practical as possible (cutting and gluing pictures and written sources), with no time limit and a substantial degree of prior discussion about the contents and approach in class beforehand, but no material to be brought in with them and no talking during the exam, except to me. (I was very happy to talk to students during the exam myself, as the last thing I wanted was any misunderstanding about what I expected.)

The exam they wrote was a success. I was pleased both with the authenticity of what they had produced and with the differentiation which the results provided between students. They had found it a different challenge from normal. Some were very complimentary and spoke about it having been the most enjoyable exam they had written.

Nowadays, the class averages a far more manageable 15 to 20, but the examination continues as an established part of the course.

### **The examination**

After a variety of experiments, the format of the examination has remained fairly stable for a number of years. This article draws on the examinations written from 2006 to 2012. The key characteristic of the examination is that it has a core set of resources. Each year the class decides (usually with a great deal of discussion and trading amongst each other) on a content topic and Grade from the school curriculum. Recent examples have included, for example, the 1917 February and October revolutions, Nazi Germany, the USA and the Great Depression. I then prepare a pack of information and source materials similar to what might be found in school history textbooks but with somewhat great range and depth, which they are given a week or two before the exam. The requirement is that they familiarise themselves with the material, as they will have to use it in the examination and that they additionally make sure that they have a good working content knowledge of the topic/period. They are required to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of that history. In the exam room they will be given a new clean set of the same resources.

The main instruction on the paper is that they use resource materials and the aims, skills and concepts<sup>1</sup> of the curriculum (Department of Basic Education, 2011a:10-11; 2011b:8-10) (supplied with the paper) in attempting each of the questions, in order to display, “appropriate professional judgement in your handling of the content knowledge”. This is the core of the examination – that the prospective teachers demonstrate that are able to work with “both” the history skills and the content to demonstrate how they will teach in this way in the future. They have to include reference to/use of the materials in all answers. The questions have varied from year to year, depending on the emphasis of the course in the year and on discussions with the class. In most years they have elected to have the choice of writing three or four (sometimes five) questions in what is labelled three hours, but on average is probably more like four and a half. Eight broad topics have been covered in the five to seven questions there have been annually per paper. Three examples of each are provided below together with an outline of a good sample answer to 1.

The first question is usually to set to capture the context of the examination and the heart of the high school teaching experience, which is the change at the end of Grade 9 from history as one half of the compulsory subject “Social Science” to “History” as an elective subject in Grades 10-12.<sup>2</sup> Examples of it are:

***The high school history teaching experience***

- Design a set of PowerPoint slides to be used to “sell” and explain FET [Grades 10-12] history to a Grade 9 class. [2010]
- The conventional view is that there is a big gap between Grade 9 and Grade 10. Explain what you think can be done to overcome the problem in history. [2011]
- An article has appeared in a newspaper drawing attention to the decline in the number of students taking history as a FET subject. Write a letter for intended publication, containing a reasoned argument about why students should still study history in FET. [2007]

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1 The previous curriculum, the National Curriculum Standards [NCS], 2002-2011 (Department of Education 2002 and 2003) placed the skills and concepts within the Learning Outcomes and set of Assessment Standards that accompanied them. The present curriculum, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement [CAPS], no longer employs outcomes. Similar skills and concepts are, however, provided (Department of Basic Education 2011a and 2011b).

2 Approximately 21% of entrants wrote the 2013 National Senior Certificate school leaving examination in History (vs 45% in Geography) Department of Basic Education 2014.

*Sample answer Q1:* [Student] C called her set of slides “Body of evidence – History: Can you solve the case? CSI [Clues, Sources, Interpretation]” The next three slides posed a question with a body outline on either side of the slide: *The right kinds of questions: What happened? Why? How? Cause and effect and Evidence for Hitler’s rise to power; Who gives us insight? Do we get all sides of the story?* Multi-perspectivity and Stereotypes – Roosevelt:Churchill:Hitler:Stalin:Mussolini; *What information can we attack and use in our historical debates?* Argument and Values - Election results. The fourth slide: *How does everything fit together?* Chronology. Final slide: *Why NOT History?* Make sense of the future now. As a CSI, you’ll: \*Get the bigger picture of historical events. \*Understand what makes heroes and villains tick.\*Know how to argue your way out of anything. \*See the world from your desk. \*Contribute to the body of evidence.

Each of the papers has had a straightforward lesson preparation question: “Plan a 45 minute lesson on... . (Specify the kind of school and class intended).” Examples have been:

### ***Lesson planning***

- Was the great depression a “crisis of capitalism”? (Grade 11) [2009]
- Why was Nazi propaganda so successful? (Grade 12) [2010]
- What is a communist revolution? (Grade 12) [2001]

*Sample answer Q1:* T designed a lesson using the teacher in role as a leader at a time in the future, who is consulting on what the most effective system of life will be for citizens. As part of the investigation he/she seeks an explanation from historians about what capitalism could offer, and particularly what went wrong with it in 1929 and 2008. Specifically, What is capitalism? What happened in these two events, what other forces might have been responsible for them? And why did they only happen twice? The class is divided into two groups (1929 and 2008) and given instructions about how to go about their investigative tasks (in pairs, each with a separate source). They have to make their explanations and are then given a second source to consider and take into account. Each has to state one major point and one associated proof.

There has usually been a question requiring some practical application using simulation, games, drama and/or music. They have included:

### ***Practical applications: simulation, games, drama, music***

- From the material given, create a simulation-based activity or game to enhance learning towards the skills of Learning Outcome Two. [2009]
- Design a role play/drama type activity on an issue taken from the material that uses ideas/principles/approaches that you have learned during the course. Explain why you are using them in this way. [2007]

- Design and provide full details of a Grade 9 cross-curricula history project (a term's work) on WW2, which incorporates elements of English and music, amongst other possibilities. [2011]

*Sample answer Q1:* L-A created a "Blame game" about the Great Depression based on a Nate Collier cartoon (supplied), which showed 16 men [Politics, Stock market, Gambler etc...] in a circle each pointing to the one on his right, saying "The depression is all his fault". Learners or pairs each get a character and will need to research it as a cause. They then act out the circle with the aim of discovering who was to blame. They begin each by blaming the one on their right, and then, for a second round, blame the one on their left. The class then chooses the three most blameworthy, who have to defend themselves, followed by a vote for the top culprit. Post-game debrief: What was it like to be blamed and what was it like to blame others? Use the Blame game to establish why Hoover and Roosevelt both acted as they did.

The ability to select and use source material to create exercises for pupils is tested in each paper. This has been the most answered question in the six years. These are examples:

### ***Exercises using source materials***

- Design a source-based test/exam question using the sources on the page, 'Voices - Jews under the Nazis' that should take Grade 9s 20-30 minutes to complete, and give full details of how you will assess it. [2008]
- You are aware of a wide range of ability in your Grade 9 history class and you have decided to do something to accommodate this. Produce source-based activities for a lesson at three different levels (i.e. using the same sources but three different sets of questions), with the instruction that learners can choose the level at which they believe they can achieve their best result. [2011]
- Set the sources section of a Grade 11 term test on the topic (50 marks), making clear provision for the some questions which test lower order skills and some which test both lower and higher order skills. Provide an outline of the possible answers. [2012]

*Sample answer Q1:* N used an introductory paragraph about Kristallnacht to set the scene for three sources, each an eye-witness account. Three questions were asked on each (a knowledge/concept, a discussion of the contents, and an analysis (e.g. 1.3: Analyse the source carefully. Judging from the description, what were the objectives of Kristallnacht? 3.3 How does the mother's term "Jewish pig!" relate to the testimony in Source 2?). The fourth question of the exercise was: "Look at all three sources again. How do the events of Kristallnacht and its aftermath express features of Nazi ideology as discussed in class?" (Answers and assessment details provided.)

As the National Senior Certificate (the school leaving examination) requires extended writing for essay-type questions, developing student writing is always a key aspect of the course and it is usually the subject of an examination question, such as:

### ***Student writing***

- You wish to give your class practice in answering Grade 12-level essay questions. Set an appropriate question based on the material and outline, step by step, how you would instruct and guide them. [2012]
- Develop an extended writing activity that begins with a class debate. Give all that a teacher would need to present and assess it. [2008]
- You have set your Grade 9 class the following 500-600 word essay to write: “The ordinary German people should not be blamed for WW2. Discuss.” Explain in detail how you would prepare the class to write it as successfully as possible. [2011]

*Sample answer Q1:* L outlined a six step strategy for the 1917 February and October revolutions. a. Students are given a list containing key information, the main concepts and the chief participants at the start of the lesson. They then highlight those that refer only to 1905, only to 1917 or both and write why alongside. b. They identify long and short term causes from the list and discuss them in pairs and as a class. c. The class orders the causes from most to least important, and provides justifications. d. A page of varied sources is handed to the class. e. Using the material and the previous decisions, students must write, “Were it not for WWI, the 1917 revolutions might never have occurred.’ To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?” Paragraphs: 1. While one could argue... 2. Although... 3. In spite of... 4. On the other hand... 5. In closing... .f. Once a draft has been written, students should use three different colours to highlight the “what”, the “why” and the “why” aspects that they have written about in their texts.

Some of the papers have had a second question requiring the analysis and use of sources, which has been more general in the task set and has been posed in an unpredictable way, as the following illustrate:

### ***Second source-based task***

- Write at least four questions on the Dr Seuss cartoon<sup>3</sup> below to test Grade 9 learners’ understanding of at least two of the CAPS skills. Identify which skill(s) each of your questions tests and provide what you would consider to be the

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<sup>3</sup> See “Ho hum! No chance of contagion” (available at: <http://worldwar2biddle.weebly.com/political-cartoons.html>, as accessed on 17 May 2014).

ideal answer to each of your questions. [2011]

- Analyse the attached materials under the following headings, providing reasons/ elucidation for each:
  - ◇ The most crucial information to understand and know;
  - ◇ The least important information to understand and know;
  - ◇ The most difficult aspects to grasp;
  - ◇ The easiest aspects to grasp;
  - ◇ An appropriate grouping of three or four sources for individual study;
  - ◇ A cartoon for a group exercise;
  - ◇ An exercise in chronology;
  - ◇ An exercise in photo analysis;
  - ◇ An exercise in text analysis. [2010]
- Make two different pair/small group discussion activities, on which is based on one source only and one which is based on a collection of sources. Give full details of each, including the expected results. [2012]

*Sample answer Q1:* R provided the following questions, together with a memorandum for them, based on the curriculum skills: “2. Extract and interpret information from a number of sources” and “3. Evaluate the usefulness of sources, including reliability, stereotyping, subjectivity.” a. Who does the single figure in the bed represent? How do you know this? b. Why does the single figure have the bed all to himself? c. What does the cartoonist suggest by labelling the different political parties, leaders, and ideologies around “Europe” as a sickness? d. Do you think the cartoonist is for or against American involvement in World War II? How do you know? e. Why is it ironic that the single figure in the bed has a smug, complacent, attitude towards events in Europe?

An option that has attempted recreate classroom realities has been the “case study” question:

### ***Classroom case studies***

- You have a Grade 9 class that is divided on the Holocaust. Some, it seems to you by their comments, are not unsympathetic to Hitler and the Nazi party, going so far as to suggest that South Africa needs a leader like Hitler now. Others don’t seem to care very much about what happened. They just have to learn it and want to know how they can get good marks. A third group is appalled by to the Holocaust and translate their emotional response to support for Israel in the Middle East today. What do you do? [2008]

- One of your two Grade 11 classes appears completely uninterested in studying the great depression, taking the attitude that it's all about economics and it's boring history. The other is more attentive, but it seems that most of them are only interested in getting a good mark. What do you do? [2009]

*Sample answer Q1:* T-A's response was to propose that she would adapt her teaching to teach the section in greater depth than usual. Then: *The issue of supporting Hitler and Nazism* – they could be the ones who fall victim themselves, as it wasn't only the Jews who were targeted; secondly she would teach about other genocides and compare their leaders with Hitler. *Those who feel the Holocaust means nothing* – an event like this could easily happen again (and has in Southern Africa) – apathy causes ignorance. *Those who are appalled and support Israel* – the Middle East has many groups and they need to learn to see it objectively from a number of different viewpoints. In summary: a. "What you didn't know about the Holocaust and anti-Semitism"; b. "So you think we need a leader like Hitler? This is what might happen if we did..."; c. "Why you should care about the Holocaust and other genocides?"; d. "We need to see both sides of the story. We can easily be the ones who are ignored and stereotyped."

Some examinations have contained unique questions, which cannot be categorised. These have been included as a result of suggestions made during discussions prior to the exam:

#### ***Unique questions as a result of pre-examination discussions***

- When teaching this and similar history, how would you make links between the past and the learner's present and future agency? [2010]
- Present two sets of arguments, one for and one against the present Grade 10-12 history curriculum. (Include, amongst other aspects, the content, the assessment standards, text books and subject assessment guidelines.) [2008]
- How useful is the concept of empathy in teaching history to Grade 11s? Discuss, providing examples from the material provided, amongst others. [2009]

*Sample answer Q1:* K begins with a hypothetical response from a class: "Why were the Germans so stupid as to let the Nazis take power!" She then explains that the Germans "gave in" slowly, bit by bit and that every concession led to their giving up their agency. (Source: Van Papen: "[Hitler] had been brought to power by the normal interplay of democratic processes... neither he nor his movement had acquired the character or perpetrated the atrocities for which they were to be condemned later.") Students need to be aware of how this might happen in their own social contexts but also in their future responsibilities in the workplace and political contexts. a. Consideration must always come before emotion (Germans voted with their emotions). b. Dealing with people once they are in charge – people were happy until they could no longer speak



up. c. History teaches civic responsibility and values, which must always be considered critically. d. The concept of cause and effect must be grasped – that their present decisions have future effects their decisions can have.

## **Discussion**

Reflection on the purpose and use of the examination raises a number of questions.

### ***What does the examination demand?***

The examination attempts to replicate the life experience of history teachers in that it places them in a situation where they know what knowledge they have and what materials are at their disposal and are required to think quickly of approaches and strategies that will work in their classrooms. It approximates “thinking on your feet”. It makes them consider in short order three quite different teaching contexts and to demonstrate that they are able to make realistic decisions about the “amount” of history, the sequence of it and its pacing (how long it will take and how much time it deserves to be given to it). It is not a comprehensive examination, however, as the range of questions in each paper is somewhat arbitrary and, given the very wide range of local schools (in terms of student numbers and class size, resources and facilities and the backgrounds of the high school students), it is very difficult to give it a specific focus beyond that contained in the curriculum documents. The topics are associated with those covered in the course. The examination mark is half of the final course mark – the rest is made up of practical assignments, lesson planning and delivery.

### ***What do the examination results show?***

There are a number of clear trends in the results of the examination over the course of the years. It exercises an important moderating influence in that the top teachers stand out more obviously and the weak ones do worse than they do in the assignment marks. There have never, however, been students who have done well in the examination who have not had a good assignment mark. The marks per question also show a distinct difference between those students who can sustain a level of achievement across all three or four/five questions and those who cannot. Those who do well in all the questions that

they answer are likely to be far better all round. It is possible to obtain a good mark for a question from a good idea/set of ideas, but this does not sustain performance in the other questions. Students have always liked the fact that they are given a choice about how many questions they answer. (Speculating, this is probably because it relaxes the pressure on them, as they think that they are less likely to be “caught out” by a question they would rather not have to answer. It also satisfies both those who like to do things in detail and those do not.) The results show no real difference in performance between those opting for three or more than three questions. Occasionally, however, it is apparent that a student might have been better off doing only three questions when there is one answer that is conspicuously poorer than the others.

### ***What about the marking?***

As all the questions were posed in a completely open-ended way and the classes have been small, there have not been memorandums or rubrics used in the marking (though generic ones could be provided if one desired). Marking is guided by checking the accuracy and the suitable and appropriate use of historical content knowledge, together with professional judgement regarding the pedagogical and organisational aspects. It is, thus, very subjective. The fact that the external examiner marks the papers a second time increases the marking reliability, however. The exam results are all discussed with the external examiner and agreement is reached on the cases where there are (always small) differences in the marks awarded (typically 25% of cases).

### ***Online?***

The examination lends itself to being answered using ICT and this was attempted in one of the years. The results, however, were conspicuously poorer than in previous year because students put such unnecessary effort into the presentation of their work and into constant internet searching that they lost focus. They also lost the benefit of “playing” with paper (as experienced in card sorting strategies) – cutting things out, writing on them, moving them around and using the freehand creativity that goes with such work. It reverted to a pen and paper format again after that, but the ICT experiment should be tried again, given much faster internet speeds and greater student familiarity with the media.

### ***Summative assessment?***

The examination introduces a significant summative aspect to the assessment of the history education students. Traditionally, the approach to these subject teaching courses at the University of Cape Town has been to use their assessment as formatively as possible – to develop skills, to allow practice, to ensure that the students maximise the short time that they have for coursework and to allow much personal reflection and growth as a result of their teaching experiences in schools. It has not relied on a strict summative evaluation of what students are capable of at the end of their qualification. The examination is often the last contact that the students have with the PGCE programme so there is no feedback apart from the mark received. There have been instances when students have enquired about their performance (which has been encouraged) and also times when the examination has meant that they repeat the course the following year. These have been infrequent, however. The examination serves, therefore, as a formal ending of the course. It is a moment when everyone is together for the last time, but, strangely for all, the one time that there is no sharing amongst the class. Many students leave on a “high”. They know that they have been extended more than at any time in the preceding course and have a sense of accomplishment. The recurring comment from some that it is the nicest examination they have ever written relates both to the exam’s practical aspect and that it does not have a time limit. The summative element is present in one further instance. It provides a much stronger sense of confidence in one’s ability to recommend or act as a referee for students when they apply for teaching posts.

### ***Lower and higher order thinking?***

The insistence from many international quarters that assessment be tightened by specifying the levels of cognitive demand and depth of knowledge to be expected (and maintained) in examination papers and similar assessment formats draws attention to the skills that teachers require in setting assessment. The intention of these papers is not to identify or specify the degree of higher order thinking required of the PGCE students in these processes. But they have consistently demonstrated such ability in many of the questions. Analysis of answers shows that students who are aware of the distinction between lower and higher order thinking and seek to translate that into their lesson planning and materials development for pupils, themselves display higher order thinking far more regularly. The papers, thus, discriminate well between

students in terms of their own thinking, while showing the influence that this will have on their interaction with learners and pedagogic practices.

### ***Testing in-service teachers?***

As demands for testing existing teachers grow more and more strident, the nature of such testing has become increasingly contested (see, for example, Popham, 2013). There is no pen and paper testing of teachers in South Africa, but recently an examination for markers (who are employed by the provincial departments of education) of the National Senior Certificate has been introduced. The Western Cape Education Department history examination has successfully employed a similar approach to the one in this examination, except that it is required that everyone writing the paper will already have an adequate content knowledge of the Grade 12 history curriculum. There are three standard tasks: 1. to draw up a set of marking guidelines (the memorandum) for a Grade 12 essay question (supplied); 2. to mark and assess an answer to an essay question written by a Grade 12 learner using the matrix supplied and giving reasons for the assessment; and, 3. to write the best possible answer to two source-based sets of questions, using a set of sources provided. The combination of these three questions and the sources has enabled what, so far, appears to be a reliable means of establishing the credentials of markers.

### **The examination and the nature of history education**

Three core aspects of history education are examined.

#### ***Content knowledge***

History, unlike Mathematics, Physics and Economics, for instance, does not have a fundamental body of knowledge, which learners grasp and build on in a step-by-step fashion. Its knowledge structure is horizontal rather than vertical (see Young and Muller, 2007:16). Like adding carriages to a train, it does not usually matter which history content follows which and how wide the range of content knowledge is. This makes it imperative when assessing teachers to specify in advance the content to be used as the basis for a history education examination, in order that they have common insight and understanding into the content within which will apply their teaching ideas. Without such

a content base the examination is impoverished, as students are taxed with having to come up with suitable content examples at the same time as they try to devote themselves to the pedagogical aspects. At the extreme, it runs the risk of not being history at all, as students will be tempted to provide the methods without providing any historical content context.

As investigation is so much the heart of history (the beginning of any attempt to provide evidence of the past), it is also crucial that the examination provide enough challenge to students to explore the content in some depth, “before” they consider the teaching of it. A stock of effective classroom ideas ready to be poured out an examination does not constitute history education.

### ***Skills in context***

Just as generic teaching ideas without historical content are not history education, so, too, generic skills don’t make history education. Many of the students in the history education course are also English majors, and if permitted, they lapse very easily into regarding history skills and English skills as the same thing. Setting source questions then becomes the same as setting comprehension or text-based questions in English.

The early editions of this examination informed students of the content topic for it beforehand but kept the sources provided with the paper unseen. Experience showed, however, that there was a marked improvement in the historical quality of the tasks created using the sources when the sources themselves were provided beforehand. (This also assisted students to prepare the content better, as they needed to contextualise the sources in advance.)

A further benefit has been that by providing the sources and the (CAPS) curriculum’s tables of skills and concepts in the examination, students have been forced to work with skills and content at the same time (thereby modelling what the curriculum expects). It enables them to demonstrate also that skills are not source dependent or taught source by source, but rather context by context. This is the core of evidence-related history teaching.

### ***Meaning making and narrative***

It is very easy in a didactics examination to lose the notion that history teaching is all about making meaning and creating narratives. The content, the teaching ideas and the sources all too readily find expression in separate

activities without anything to link them, tell a story and create meaning. The examination has tried to overcome this by setting a range of different questions and by expecting, from the relatively open-ended way in which they are posed, that students will have to display an ability to focus on the overall narrative.

### **Conclusion – What should history teachers know?**

By its nature a PGCE (one-year, catch all, do all) history education course is far more concerned with the “how” of teaching than the “what”. This title of the article has sought to draw attention to that fact that history teachers have to know “what” to teach as well as knowing “how” to teach. It goes beyond that. The craft of history teaching is being able to weld both together. The examination has attempted to do that. It has also shown that expecting students to work on their own under lifelike working conditions can produce an authentic assessment of their capability.

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